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ABSTRACT

Two components of stress (organizational stress (role conflict and role ambiguity) and perceived teacher burnout) were measured by surveys completed by 443 special education teachers in Connecticut. Data were collected on the Stress Survey for Special Educators, the Maslach Burnout Inventory, and the Role Questionnaire. Multiple regression analyses were performed to investigate the interrelationship among the organizational stress factors of role conflict and role ambiguity and perceived burnout (with relevant personal and professional characteristics controlled). Results revealed that role conflict accounted for the greatest variance in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and only role ambiguity accounted for significant variance in the subscale of personal accomplishment. Recommendations are made for stress reduction interventions (including support groups) and for further research. (CL)

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THE EFFECT OF ROLE CONFLICT AND ROLE AMBIGUITY ON PERCEIVED LEVELS OF BURNOUT AMONG SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Background

Stress is a reality for many people today. Individuals of all ages and occupations are affected at one time or another by stress. As public education faces new and greater demands, teacher stress is an increasing phenomenon. The term "burnout" is applied to teachers suffering from stress in a nonproductive manner. For special education teachers, stress is apparent for many reasons. In their role, special educators serve a varied and challenging clientele. Daily classroom situations may vary in more profound ways than in regular classrooms in emotional intensity and quality. In addition to these factors, tensions are brought about by changes in the delivery of services as mandated by recent state and federal legislation.

With the implementation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the structure and scope of special education has expanded and changed. For the special education teacher, stress may originate from a lack of support services, excessive time demands and increased regulatory paperwork. In addition, special education teachers have increased responsibilities and new roles. Excessive time may now be spent in mandated instructional planning and programming meetings regarding special education students. Thus, special education teachers encounter various situations that contribute to feelings of stress and possible burnout. Besides the harm of stress upon the professionals involved, the re-

cipients of their service are also affected. In education, these "recipients" are students. Students cannot afford a service which is deteriorated by stress. Based on the assumption that teachers are a core in any instructional situation, it is vital to insure a healthy environment for them and their students.

The intent of this study was twofold. The initial purpose was to expand upon the research on burnout in the human-services profession to include the area of special education. The concept of special education teacher burnout is based on the exploratory work by Maslach & Jackson (1979) in the helping professions. Although the literature centering on teacher burnout has increased recently, much of this literature has been conjectural (Reed, 1979; Walsh 1980; Youngs, 1978) with little of an empirical nature. Furthermore, research pertaining to the stress and burnout of special education teachers is extremely limited (Bensky, Shaw, Gouse, Bates & Dixon, 1980; Weiskopf, 1980).

The second purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of organizational stress factors (role conflict and role ambiguity) to perceived teacher burnout. Specifically, this investigation examined whether there was a difference among the perceived levels of role conflict, role ambiguity and perceived teacher burnout factors (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment) when controlling for select personal and professional variables (age cluster, sex, attained education level, marital status, teacher classification, exceptionality taught, and years of teaching service) of special education teachers.

Related Literature

This study focused on two components of stress. These components are: the elements of organizational stress involving role ambiguity and role conflict, and perceived teacher burnout.

The hypotheses involving role conflict and role ambiguity have their theoretical base in the work of Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal(1964). Kahn found that individuals who experienced role ambiguity suffered lower job satisfaction, higher job related tension and lower self confidence. Similar behaviors have been observed for persons experiencing role conflict (Kahn, et al., 1964).

Studies (French & Caplan, 1970; Margolis, Kroes & Quinn, 1974) predicated upon the work of Kahn et al., (1964) and House & Rizzo (1972) have examined role conflict and role ambiguity in various professions with confirming results. Several studies have examined role conflict and role ambiguity in teaching and found both to be significant factors relating to job satisfaction and personal stress (Dunham, 1967; Tosi & Tosi, 1970).

Perceived teacher burnout has received limited empirical attention in education (Anderson, 1980; Schwab, 1980). Initially, the constructs of psychological and physiological stress (Selye, 1936, 1956, 1974) greatly influenced the conceptual study of burnout in the human-services profession (Freudenberger, 1975, 1976).

The work of Maslach (1976, 1978, 1979) and associates (Maslach & Jackson, 1979; Maslach & Pines, 1977) has led to a more extensive and systematic methodology for examining burnout. Maslach and her associates found that an individual's self-perception of burnout was affected by such personal variables

as one's age, sex, marital status, and attained education level. Still, caution must be taken when interpreting such findings since some of these variables may be confounded by a particular occupation within the helping profession (Maslach & Jackson, 1979).

Research examining the relationship among role conflict, role ambiguity and perceived burnout has not been conducted using special education teachers. Kahn (1978) suggested that burnout may be related to role conflict and role ambiguity. This suggestion is predicated upon Kahn's earlier research (1964) in which he notes that the emotional cost of role conflict and ambiguity is perceived in increased job tension, lower job satisfaction, and reduced confidence in the employing organization. Conflict is also associated with poor interpersonal relations, and reduced trust and respect for close colleagues. Such factors may contribute to a state of perceived burnout in human service professionals.

Thus, this study examined the phenomenon of stress among special education teachers. It is of value to focus and examine the specific factors contributing to the incidence, intensity and frequency of burnout for this segment of the teaching force.

Methodology

The methodology section encompasses the instrumentation and sample utilized in this study, as well as the procedures for the analysis of data. In concluding this section, the analysis of data is reported.

Instrumentation

The data for this study were collected using the Stress Survey for Special Educators (SSSE). In Part I, Personal and Professional Data, special

education teachers were asked to provide information regarding their personal and professional characteristics of age, sex, marital status, attained education level and role in the special education program.

Part II of the Survey contained the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The version of the MBI used in this study contained twenty-two items centering on the attitudes, feelings and perceptions of the special education teachers towards both self and their students (See Table I). This instrument provided a measure of perceived burnout in terms of the three subscales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lack of personal accomplishment. Each item was rated twice, once for intensity and again for frequency. The frequency rating for each item ranged from 1 (A Few Times A Year) to 6 (Every Day). The response range for intensity was from 1 (Very Mild; Barely Noticeable) to 7 (Major, Very Strong). In addition, the respondent could check "NEVER", if the described feeling or attitude was never experienced (perceived). For each of these subscales, separate scores were derived for the frequency and the intensity with which feelings were experienced. According to Maslach and Jackson (1979), persons with higher scores on the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales, and a lower score on the personal accomplishment subscale would be perceiving themselves as more burned out. From one's scores on the three subscales of the MBI, an individual is not classified as "burned out" or "not burned out", but is placed on a continuum from "more burned out" to "less burned out".

Since the MBI was designed to assess burnout in the human service professions, the term "recipient" is in reference to the individuals for whom a given service is provided. For the purpose of this study, the word "student"

TABLE I*

Subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory

A. Emotional Exhaustion

Statement #:

1. I feel emotionally drained from my work.
2. I feel used up at the end of the workday.
3. I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
6. Working with people all day is really a strain for me.
8. I feel burned out from my work.
13. I feel frustrated by my work.
14. I feel I'm working too hard on my job.
16. Working directly with people puts too much stress on me.
20. I feel like I'm at the end of my rope.

B. Depersonalization

Statement #:

5. I feel I treat some students as if they were impersonal "objects".
10. I've become more callous toward people since I took this job.
11. I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.
15. I don't really care what happens to some students.
22. I feel students blame me for some of their problems.

C. Personal Accomplishment

Statement #:

4. I can easily understand how my students feel about things.
7. I deal very effectively with the problems of my students.
9. I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work.
12. I feel very energetic.
17. I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my students.
18. I feel exhilarated after working closely with my students.
19. I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.
21. In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly.

*Table from Maslach & Jackson (1979, pp. 22-23).

TABLE II*

Subscales of the Role Questionnaire

A. Role Conflict

Statement #:

1. I have to do things that should be done differently.
2. I have to work on unnecessary things.
3. I receive an assignment without the proper manpower to complete it.
4. I receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials to execute it.
5. I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently.
6. I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.
7. I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.
8. I do things that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others.

B. Role Ambiguity

Statement #:

9. I know exactly what is expected of me.
10. I feel certain about how much authority I have.
11. Clear, planned goals exist for my job.
12. I know that I have divided my time properly.
13. I know what my responsibilities are.
14. Explanation is clear of what has to be done.

*Table from Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970).

was used instead of "recipient". This change was made to alleviate ambiguity as special education teachers completed the MBI. Iwanicki and Schwab (1981) have presented evidence confirming the reliability and validity of the MBI when adapted for use with teachers.

Part III of the Survey contained the Role Questionnaire. Developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970), the questionnaire ascertains the degree of role conflict and role ambiguity. The questionnaire as presented in Table II contains fourteen items to be rated. Items one through eight assess role conflict, with items nine through fourteen centering on role ambiguity. The rating scale ranges from 1 to 7. Items receiving a score of 1 would indicate the respondent perceiving the statement as not reflecting his/her job. A response score of 7 to an item indicates strong agreement with the item as being reflective of the respondent's occupation. The role ambiguity items must be reverse scored since these items are worded positively for clarity. Thus, higher subscale scores on the Role Questionnaire are indicative of higher levels of role conflict and role ambiguity.

The scales of the instrument have demonstrated factorical independence and reliability (House & Rizzo, 1972; Keller, 1975). In addition, research has supported Rizzo, et al's., proposition that role conflict and role ambuity are separate, yet related constructs of organizational stress (Schuler, Alday & Brief, 1975).

Sample

All ten of Connecticut's central cities school systems were invited to

participate in this study. Each school system serves a city of 50,000 or more inhabitants which is the core of an urbanized area (Census Users' Guide, 1970). Eight of the ten urban school districts expressed the desire to participate in the study. Thus, all special education teachers of eight central cities in Connecticut were the subjects of this study. This group included those individuals certified by the State of Connecticut to teach the mentally handicapped, learning disabled and emotionally handicapped. Participation of teachers was voluntary and each special education teacher was asked to complete a Stress Survey for Special Educators. Of the 707 original surveys distributed, 502 (approximately 71% of the total survey) were returned. Of the surveys returned, 59 were not used because the respondents had not completed the survey validly. The final sample for this study consisted of 443 special education teachers (approximately 63% of the total surveyed).

Statistical Procedures

Multiple regression analysis was employed to examine the interrelationship among the organizational stress factors of role conflict and role ambiguity, and perceived burnout when controlling for the personal and professional characteristics relevant to special educators.

For this study, the personal and professional characteristics of the respondents were categorized as follows:

The Personal Characteristics of Respondents

Sex - Male
Female

Age Cluster - 22 to 25 years old
26 to 30 years old
31 to 35 years old
36 to 45 years old
46 to 65 years old

Marital Status - Single
Married
Divorced

Attained Education Level - Bachelor's
Master's
6th Year (CAGs)

The Professional Characteristics of Respondents

Teacher Classification - Self Contained Classroom
Resource Room

The Exceptionality Taught - Mentally Retarded
Learning Disabled
Emotionally Disturbed
Cross-Categorical

Years of Teaching Experience - 1 to 3 years
4 to 9 years
10 years and more

Using the three subscale measurements of burnout (Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment) as dependent variables, six regression analyses were done. Three regression analyses were conducted for each intensity subscale of burnout as measured in the MBI, and the same for each frequency subscale of burnout. In order to control for variance in the dependent variables that may be caused by the personal and professional characteristics of the teachers, these variables of age cluster, sex, attained education level, teacher classification, exceptionality taught and years of teaching experience were entered into the regression equation first. Next, the remaining independent variables, role conflict and role ambiguity entered the equation in a stepwise fashion. This permitted the variable which accounted for and explained the most variance in the criterion to enter the equation

first, and the subsequent predictor to enter if it accounted for additional significant variance. A F-ratio was used in order to determine if each entering predictor accounted for a significant increase in explained variance in the criteria.

Findings

The results presented in Tables III, IV and V support several findings regarding the relationship of perceived role conflict and role role ambiguity to teacher burnout after controlling for the effects of the personal and professional variables of special education teachers.

The organizational stress variables of role conflict and role ambiguity, as indicated in Table III, each explained a significant amount of variance in the Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization subscales of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Role conflict accounted for the most variance in both emotional exhaustion (13.5% frequency, 19.3% intensity) and depersonalization (14.2% frequency, 13.9% intensity). In addition, role ambiguity accounted for nearly 1% of the variance in the frequency and intensity dimensions of emotional exhaustion and 2.1% for the frequency and intensity dimensions of depersonalization. However, only role ambiguity accounted for a significant amount of variance in personal accomplishment (7.2% frequency, 6.0% intensity). From these results, role conflict accounted for the greatest variance in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and only role ambiguity accounted for significant variance in the subscale of Personal Accomplishment. These findings are supportive of earlier studies that role stressors vary in importance and degree contingent upon the specific occupation held and the job outcome measured (Keller, 1975; Van Sell, Brief & Schuler, 1980).

TABLE III

Percent of Variance Explained by the Personal & Professional Variables, Role Conflict & Role Ambiguity in the Subscales of Teacher Burnout

	Personal and Professional Variables	Role Conflict	Role Ambiguity
Emotional Exhaustion			
Frequency	4.5%	13.5%	0.8%
Intensity	5.0%	19.3%	0.7%
Depersonalization			
Frequency	8.8%	14.2%	2.1%
Intensity	7.0%	13.9%	2.1%
Personal Accomplishment			
Frequency	2.2%	---	7.2%
Intensity	0.8%	---	6.0%

TABLE IV

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for the Relationship between Role Variables and the Frequency of Perceived Teacher Burnout When Controlling for the Personal and Professional Variables of Special Education Teachers

Step	Variable Entered	R^2	Increase in R^2	$\hat{R}$	F
		Emotional Exhaustion (N=443)			
1	Personal & Professional Variables	.045			
2	Role Conflict	.180	.135		71.702**
3	Role Ambiguity	.189	.008	.416	4.473*
		Depersonalization (N=443)			
1	Personal & Professional Variables	.088			
2	Role Conflict	.230	.142		80.083**
3	Role Ambiguity	.251	.021	.490	12.317**
		Personal Accomplishment (N=443)			
1	Personal & Professional Variables	.022			
2	Role Ambiguity	.094	.072	.276	34.310**
3	Role Conflict	(Variable did not account for sufficient additional variance to be included in the analysis.)			

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

TABLE V

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for the Relationship between Role Variables and the Intensity of Perceived Teacher Burnout When Controlling for the Personal and Professional Variables of Special Education Teachers

Step	Variable Entered	R^2	Increase in R^2	$\hat{R}$	F
		Emotional Exhaustion (N=443)			
1	Personal & Professional Variables	.050			
2	Role Conflict	.243	.193		110.563**
3	Role Ambiguity	.250	.007	.485	4.138*
		Depersonalization (N=443)			
1	Personal & Professional Variables	.070			
2	Role Conflict	.209	.139		76.441**
3	Role Ambiguity	.230	.021	.458	11.458**
		Personal Accomplishment (N=443)			
1	Personal & Professional Variables	.008			
2	Role Ambiguity	.068	.060	.224	27.876**
3	Role Conflict	.069	.001		0.453

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

Finally, from the results presented in Tables 3-5, it is evident that when the role stressors of conflict and ambiguity are combined different amounts of variance in each subscale of teacher burnout was accounted for. Role conflict and role ambiguity in combination accounted for the greatest variance in emotional exhaustion (14.3% frequency, 20.0% intensity), less variance in depersonalization (16.3% frequency, 16% intensity), and the least variance in personal accomplishment (7.2% frequency, 6.0% intensity).

Recommendations

Perceived teacher burnout is a phenomenon of increasing concern. This study was conducted to examine the concept of burnout and stress and its effect upon special education teachers. The findings point to several areas where stress needs to be alleviated. Most stress-reduction interventions have been directed at the symptoms rather than at the underlying causes. Thus, two sets of recommendations are made in concluding this study. The first centers on the practitioner in the instructional setting, while the second set of recommendations focuses on suggestions for further research. This research is advocated to verify, examine, and probe issues which may influence the construct of stress and its affect on teacher burnout.

Stress-Reduction Interventions for Practitioners

Today's special education teachers may benefit from the following suggestions to reduce stress.

a. Preservice and inservice programs and opportunities are needed for for teachers to develop the ability to identify sources of stress in the instructional setting as well as effective coping strategies to deal with these sources of stress.

b. Support groups are needed by special educators to share feelings of success and failure with understanding colleagues. Such support is needed

especially for nontenured teachers to allow them to deal effectively with problems before they intensify. These support groups could provide a base of feedback and reality for their members. Constructive meetings of colleagues to discuss feelings and concerns is of mutual benefit for all involved.

c. The best prescription for stress-reduction is prevention. With growing knowledge of stress-producing events and influences, educators must assume a more proactive stance in safeguarding their emotional and physical well-being. Knowledge of stress-relieving techniques, such as a daily regimen of physical exercise and periods of relaxation, are effective for many individuals.

Recommendations for Further Research

The intent of this study was to contribute to existing knowledge concerning teacher stress and burnout. The results of this research have raised several questions. These concerns include the following areas which need to be addressed in future research:

a. Empirical research on stress and its effect upon special education teachers is limited. Since the constructs employed have been defined in numerous ways, it is difficult to generalize across those studies which have been conducted. As future studies are conducted in the areas of stress and burnout in special education, consistency of measurement and terminology would be desirable.

b. An indepth study of the interaction between the special educator's personal and professional needs is desirable in order to determine significant sources of stress. Opportunities are available to identify professional needs by observing teachers as they act, interact, and react with students, colleagues and parents. With volunteer teachers, procedures could be developed to assess their personal needs. By analyzing the interaction between the

professional and personal needs of special education teachers, sources of stress could be identified. Also, the effects of these stressors on students and family members could be studied. As of this writing, no study has documented the effect of teacher stress upon "significant others" (students, colleagues, and family members) in the teacher's life.

c. The research question of this study should be tested among larger and more varied populations of special education teachers to verify the resultant findings. In pursuing this recommendation meta-analysis could be employed. Meta-analysis was first used by Glass (1976) to describe the statistical analysis of a large collection of results from individual studies for the purpose of integrating findings. From the increasing use of the Maslach Burnout Inventory in education, the data of similar teacher stress research studies could be analyzed for similarities and differences. The findings of such an analysis could be of vital importance to practitioners as well as future researchers. Such collaborative efforts to understand stress could benefit not only special educators, but also, the students they serve.

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